

Promoting Gender Equality by Facilitating Women's Collective Problem-Solving Capacity Development: Japanese Experience with the Post-War Life Improvement Program and Its Application to Contemporary Developing Countries

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Key words: agency, capacity development, household decision making, group problem-solving process facilitation, institutionalization of self-reliant development model

1. Introduction

One of the most important qualities for human beings to have is agency: a core capacity/competence for making decisions, entering into agreements, and acting by and for themselves. Agency is a crucial dimension also in the promotion of gender equality. In practice, women in developing countries often are not allowed to make independent decisions or take independent actions. This is the case even in their biological roles, such as with respect to the home life issues which are within their gender norms and thus closely associated with practical gender needs (PGNs). We must ask, then, what pragmatic (effective and culturally sensitive) strategies, if taken by policy makers and program managers, might help empower women and promote gender equality over the long run? This paper presents experience with the Life Improvement Program (LIP),¹ implemented in Japan after World War II and since the mid-2000s applied to JICA development projects/programs in developing countries. It also evaluates LIP contributions in post-war and contemporary contexts.

2. LIP: historical context, methods and contributions

2-1. Historical background and the establishment of LIP

In 1945 when Japan accepted the World War II surrender, the country was characterized by rural areas with declining productivity and urban areas with destroyed infrastructure.

¹ The original Japanese term *Seikatsukaizen* is commonly translated into “livelihood improvement.” In this paper, however, “life improvement” is used.

* Profound appreciation to Ms. Kinko Horike (WELI), Professor Toru Yanagihara (Takushoku University), Professor Tomomi Kozaki (Nihon University), Ms. Miho Ota (University of Tokyo), Mr. Yukio Homma (JOICFP), Mr. Nobuaki Hanawa (RDI), Dr. Kumi Sawano (Meiji University.) and supervisors and colleagues of JICA-RI for their meaningful input and advice.

People suffered from food shortages, malnutrition, deteriorating health, poor sanitary conditions, and rapid population growth (Sato 2003:35, Sato 2002:I-1-2). Under these conditions, rural women were on the bottom rung of rural poverty (see Annex1). In the Japanese traditional family-oriented and male-dominant rural society, social norms prevented women from making decisions for themselves or for their families and communities; they were expected to work simply as physical laborers (Takaoka 2003:31-32).²

The General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ) attempted to convert Japan into a democratic society, modeled on the United States. To that end, a series of policies were adopted. These included enactment of a constitution, demobilization of the military, dissolution of financial combines (*Zaibatsu*), and education reform (Sato 2003: 36-37). GHQ believed that the wave of democratization measures would reach the rural areas where 70 percent of the population lived at that time. Consequently, the Land Reform Law (1946), the Agricultural Cooperative Law (1947), and the Agriculture Improvement Promotion Law (1948) were enacted.

In response to the enforcement of the third of these laws, prefectural governments created agricultural improvement extension offices and from 1949 assigned two types of extension workers: agricultural extension workers (*farm advisors*, mainly men) who offered technical guidance on agricultural production, and life extension workers (*home advisors*, all women) who were in charge of home life improvement, in effect, LIP (Sato 2003: 36-37). The first batch of LIP workers was composed of 262 women (Ota 2004:28).

2-2. What was LIP? Its objectives, methods and supporting mechanisms

2-2-1. LIP objectives³

LIP had two main objectives: 1) to help rural people become independent thinkers (self-reliant farmers) and 2) to bring improvement to rural home life (WELI 1987:1). Thus, LIP aimed at improving *home life* – that is, *daily* life, not *farm* life which was concerned with directly productive activities and was taken care of by *farm advisors*.

² It should be also noted, however, that the absence of husbands during the war forced women to be decision-makers for their families, a situation which might have provided an enabling context for the democratization of post-war rural communities.

³ Though the program at the national level has been implemented over a half century, this paper refers basically to the initial phase of LIP (mainly in the 1950's and 1960's) as the socio-economic context was somewhat similar to that of contemporary developing countries.

LIP tried to foster self-help problem-solving capacities in agricultural households. In other words, LIP was a capacity development⁴ program which tried to help farmers solve problems in their daily lives and in their surrounding environments (i.e. communities). As home life was the province of women, especially young wives (*wakayome*) who were relegated to the lowest status within farmers' families, LIP workers essentially worked with them.

2-2-2. LIP methods: facilitate and support step-by-step, “scientific” and self-help problem-solving processes of female groups vis-a-vis home life issues

LIP was a program for democratization and self-help poverty alleviation; thus LIP workers were instructed to function strictly as facilitators *who pose questions*, not as teachers *who give answers* (Sato 2003:38-39). In the course of program implementation over a half century, LIP established facilitation methods to support *the step-by-step, “scientific”, self-help problem-solving processes of female groups vis-à-vis their home life improvement activities*.

● *Step-by-step and “scientific”*

Through frequent extension efforts, home advisors visited each household in rural areas and talked to village women, identified their life conditions, and through persistent rapport building efforts persuaded them to form groups and begin solving some of the common problems of their daily lives. However, this was a process to be taken *step-by-step*, as the rural women often did not have autonomy even in their own household chores; they were not allowed or accustomed to making decisions and taking action. They were caught up in a web of everyday problems and had no idea that there might be a way to solve them (JICA Tsukuba 2006: 13-5). Hence, LIP developed a 3-by-5 schema⁵ to categorize and rationalize problem-solving processes and trained its female workers to utilize it (see Table 1 and Box 1). According to this schema, there are *five stages* in the problem-solving process: 1st stage, have a general awareness of the problem; 2nd stage, clarify the problem; 3rd stage, develop hypotheses related to the problem; 4th stage, conduct deep, rational examination of the hypotheses before testing them; and 5th stage, undertake experimental, trial-and-error measures according to some selected hypothesi(e)s (JICA Tsukuba 2006: 13-5). LIP workers analyzed the stage at which a female group was positioned and what support it should receive. After completing a problem-solving cycle, groups often gained the capacity to solve even

⁴ For the current discussions, definitions and critical factors, refer to Hosono et al (2011).

⁵ Based on John Dewey's pragmatic problem-solving method. Satoru Umene contributed to the development of this schema in the 60's to formalize tacit knowledge accumulated by LIP workers in their field experiences. (Interview with Ms. Horike, 2010.)

larger problems, and some group leaders even gradually started to function as facilitators, themselves.

To make the problem-solving process “*scientific*” and qualitatively profound, LIP workers divided each stage into *three layers* of cognition and action – act, think, study – so that the appropriate support could be provided.

Table 1: 3-by-5 Problem-Solving Schema

Five stages of problem-solving

1 st Stage	2 nd Stage	3 rd Stage	4 th Stage	5 th Stage
Have a vague awareness of the problem	Clarify the problem	Develop a hypothesis on the problem	Conduct deep, rational examination of the hypothesis	Undertake experimental, trial-&-error actions

Three layers of action at each stage of problem solving

1 st Layer: act	2 nd Layer: think	3 rd layer: study
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Source: Elaborated by the author based on JICA Tsukuba (2006):pp.13-14.

Box 1: Three-layer structure in daily life

The following example illustrates how the three-layer structure might be applied in daily life: Instead of buying bread for breakfast, a person decides to try baking it, but fails (first layer). She therefore eats something other than bread. In the afternoon she has some time, so she considers how she can bake the bread (second layer). After thinking about it, she recognizes her ignorance and then decides to study the methodology for baking bread, receiving advice and instruction from specialists (third layer). (Source: JICA Tsukuba 2006:13-2)

- *Self-help: maximum utilization of local resources, including human capital resources*

As LIP tried to foster self-help/self-control among farmers, LIP workers persuaded female group members to seek creatively for solutions that would utilize locally available resources, including their own intelligence and physical labor, instead of first looking for external resources. “Minimizing financial expenditure” and “making the best use of available resources” were among the main LIP slogans (Sato 2003: 41). Although the national government standardized programs and offered project proposals, these were adapted to local contexts in accordance with the principle of self help (Taniguchi et al 1994).

- *Female groups: Livelihood Improvement Practice Groups*

LIP workers helped rural women form Livelihood Improvement Practice Groups and offered extension services in keeping with the step-by-step approach. In this way, they helped the groups with self reflection and learning, and with finding their own solutions. An additional benefit of the group approach was that LIP workers could identify core groups or individuals in their community who might serve as footholds for spreading Livelihood Improvement measures to other community members (JICA Tsukuba 2006: 12-8).

- *Home Life Improvement activities for better quality of life*

Home life improvement was categorized into activities related to clothing, alimentation, housing, and household management (Ota 2004: 33). When a LIP group reached the third stage of problem-solving (think theoretically about solutions), LIP workers proposed new contrivances, such as improved cooking stoves, improved work clothes or nutritious food, as options (Sato 2003: 38-39). These were tested by groups, and if judged to be appropriate and feasible they were applied in their home lives. When group capacities matured, they could also deal with improving the broader environment surrounding home life, such as community infrastructure or facilities for processing agricultural products.

2-2-3. Supporting mechanisms for LIP workers

LIP was a governmental program and its workers were hired as permanent civil servants in the national and prefectural governments. Hence they had access to certain public support features to increase the effectiveness of their activities. For example, home economics specialists were posted in each prefecture to offer technical and logistical support to LIP workers (Sato 2003:38-39). LIP workers also received in-service training (JICA Tsukuba 2006:16-6). Furthermore, in 1957 the Rural Women Empowerment and Life Improvement Association (WELI), an NPO, was established to support the program indirectly (ibid: 16-37). In addition, LIP workers could relatively easily collaborate with public officials in health and education when their interests coincided, and when the necessary resources were provided by foreign aid players (Sato 2005: 74-76). As Sato (2005:72) points out, LIP expanded from agriculture to include other sectors, such as health and education, and eventually grew into a nationwide movement called “Life Improvement Movement” (LIM). Although LIP was a government program, policy adaptation occurred in both the top down and bottom up directions (Taniguchi et al 1994). Good practices at the prefectural level were

sometimes adopted as policies at the central government level (Amano 2001: 216-217).

2-3. LIP contributions to the empowerment of village women and the promotion of gender equality and regional development

2-3-1. Successful outreach of LIP groups and diffusion of their activities

According to a national survey, in 1956 there were 5,461 home life improvement groups with a total membership of 130,992 (Mizuno 2003:26). These groups were engaged in various home life improvement activities grouped into five major categories (see Table 2-1 and Table 2-2). Regarding cooking stove improvement, Ichida (1995:32) points out that 1.5 million households began to use the improved stoves. Considering the fact that there were only 2,000 LIP extension workers in 1970 (Sato 2005:26) and that there were many superstitions hindering improvements to cooking stoves (Ichida 1995:32), these results are extraordinary.

Table 2-1: Top five LIP group activities in 1948-1956

	Activity (number of LIP groups)	Gender roles involved
1	Improvement of cooking stoves or kitchens (955)	Reproductive, Productive
2	Usage of preserved foods (869)	Reproductive
3	Usage of improved working clothes (630)	Reproductive
4	Usage of household account books (382)	Reproductive
5	Collective cooking in busy seasons (356)	Community Management, Productive

Table 2-2: Number and types of LIP activities in 1948-1956

Category	Food	Clothing	Shelter	House Management	Sanitation
Numbers of activities	1,181	2,809	1,671	1,220	781

Source: Elaborated by the author based on Ota 2004: 35-36.

2-3-2. Empowering women and promoting gender equality: some outstanding examples

No national census data are available to quantitatively measure the impact on women's empowerment and gender equality. However, we can offer many outstanding examples of group activities. Some researchers and practitioners observe that transformation of family relationships and women's empowerment were realized in many prefectures

through daily life improvements, such as cooking stoves and the management of household income/expenditures. Those group activities have sometimes extended to include community issues.

For instance, in Mie Prefecture, a LIP extension worker (here called Ms. S) successfully helped advance women's status and reduce their poverty by introducing a household account book called *Kakeibo*. LIP groups facilitated by Ms. S identified the lack of family budget management as a central problem, but they had neither the necessary skills nor access to the family budget. Hence, Ms. S first advised the group members to take notes in group gatherings as an initial activity designed to make record taking habitual; subsequently she recommended that they experiment with keeping account records of income from and expenditure for potato cultivation. After a year, the group members compared common household account books and picked one of them on a trial basis, but they found that it was not suitable for their farm household financial management. Eventually, with assistance from Ms. S, they designed their own *Kakeibo* and collectively learned in group gatherings how to keep records and how to economically allocate their family budget. This *Kakeibo* project advanced those women's status at home because it provided them opportunities to analyze how household budgets were managed and to openly discuss budget issues with family members. As a result, they succeeded in gaining a certain degree of power over their families' monetary resources. Some of those groups attempted also to eradicate flies and mosquitoes which again provided opportunities to discuss the problem with other community members. Subsequently, those women led their communities in finding solutions to other community matters, such as the construction of roads and water supply facilities (Amano 2001: 190-215).

The improved cooking stoves mentioned above were LIP "symbols." According to Ichida (1995:32-33), they contributed not only to improving home life, but also to challenging superstitions such as "stoves should not be mended in spring and fall" or "households with pregnant women should not fix or alter stoves." Such "scientific" re-examination of conventions by women generated an environment which enabled housewives to negotiate other home life issues based on evidence, thus encouraging them to further enhance their agency.

Another illustrative example is a LIP group which has expanded its activities over the last quarter century (Saito 1997). The Sumire (Violet) Group in Yamaguchi Prefecture commenced its activities by producing handicrafts and exchanging used

clothes. When their children grew up and their parents got old, the group members focused more on agricultural production. They started collective cultivation of vegetables and regularly organized farmers' markets. These collective activities gave them space to discuss community issues. In the discussions, they realized that the remoteness of a fire station was a potential problem and decided to become voluntary fire fighters themselves. This activity won high appreciation from other community members and some of the female group members became community leaders. The group also conducted participatory community "mapping" exercises (to assess the problems of and resources available to their community) and they led useful discussions on how to reinvigorate the community and save it from depopulation. They started new projects including a Japanese language school for Chinese students.

Although LIP was terminated as a national program in 2000, some LIP groups are still active at the prefectural level. Some members are now female entrepreneurs selling processed agricultural products at local stores or department stores, earning up to US\$460,000 in the most successful case (Sawano 2007:53).

2-3-3. Innovativeness of the program

As Sato (2005:73-76) points out, LIP incorporated various innovative measures relevant to today's development methodologies and models, such as the concepts of facilitation, outreach, and supporting mechanisms. The 3-by-5 schema is regarded as a crucial tool for LIP problem-solving, encompassing clothing, food, health, household economy, education, human relations and strategic household management, among others (Amano 2001: 108-175). Today it is also utilized in some development projects of JICA (Ito 2010).

3. Application of LIP methods to JICA's development projects/programs

3-1. Context and features

Although LIP was experienced and experimented with in the specific context of postwar Japan, it was thought that its methods and lessons could be applied, with appropriate modifications, to developing countries, as many development programs/projects aim at two goals that are common to the Japanese LIP: poverty alleviation and democratization (Sato 2005: 68). In the early 2000s, JICA formed a research team and evaluated the relevance of applying elements of LIP to its development projects and programs (JICA 2002 and 2003). The team was able to confirm that LIP experiences were applicable

(Fujishiro 2007:172). JICA subsequently developed a manual for applying LIP in development projects/programs (JICA Tsukuba 2006). LIP methods/measures have since been partially or fully applied to several of JICA's projects and programs.

In this section, three JICA projects are introduced and their contributions to women's empowerment, gender equity, and poverty alleviation are analyzed. Out of consideration for socio-cultural conditions in indigenous areas, the three projects have not exclusively targeted women.

3-2. Case 1: Integrated Participatory Poverty Alleviation Model Project in Daozhen County and Leishan County, Guizhou Province, China

3-2-1. Context and project description

Although the number of the impoverished has been considerably reduced over the past few decades in China, in recent years the pace of poverty reduction, especially for those at the very bottom of the income distribution, has halted (Xing et al 2009:338). More than 36% of the total population earns less than US\$2 per day (World Development Indicators). Economic inequalities between/within urban and rural areas are among the major challenges to the effective reduction of poverty in China. In rural areas, people have been increasingly exposed to the cash economy and need money for social services, without which they cannot escape the circle of poverty (JICA 2002). The Gini index has risen from 30.9% in 1981 to 45.3% in 2003, with the enlargement of rural-urban inequality being especially noticeable (World Bank 2009:32-34, Wan et al 2008:62-65). Poverty has become concentrated in the less urbanized Western regions (Wan et al 2008: 110-111).

Guizhou Province, where the project sites were located, had the lowest GDP per capita in the Southwestern region (excluding Tibet) between 2004 and 2008 (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2009). The government announced a ten-year (2001-2010) poverty reduction program (JICA 2010a:1). The JICA project was implemented in this context between November 2005 and March 2010 by the Japanese Organization for International Cooperation in Family Planning (JOICFP). The main objective of the project was to establish a model participatory poverty alleviation project that could be integrated effectively into various activities, including health, life improvement, and income generation (JICA 2010a). The project targeted communities in Daozhen and Leishan County in Guizhou Province. In these counties, according to a household survey conducted by the project, the majority of the population is categorized as

indigenous peoples and illiteracy rates are relatively high (10.6% in Daozhen and 44.2% in Leishan) (JICA 2006:2). As many men of the households have migrated to cities to find jobs (ibid: 3),⁶ the project resulted in targeting women more than men.

3-2-2. How was LIP introduced and applied: Emphasizing self-help and group effort

In early 2006 when the Guizhou Province project was started, a Japanese project team conducted field research and observed that the majority of the residents expected monetary support to improve their lives (JICA 2006). The project's Chinese counterparts also asked for monetary support (Homma 2009). The project's Japanese experts, however, felt that this signaled a "culture of dependency" that should first be transformed (interview with Mr. Homma 2010).

In June 2007, LIP was introduced into the project sites to emphasize self-help and group effort. In 2008 and 2009, the project team held workshops related to LIP and sent Chinese project counterparts to Japan to better understand LIP in detail. In 2009, an implementation manual was published for health promotion and rural development activities, to which LIP methods were integrated as important components (JICA 2010c).

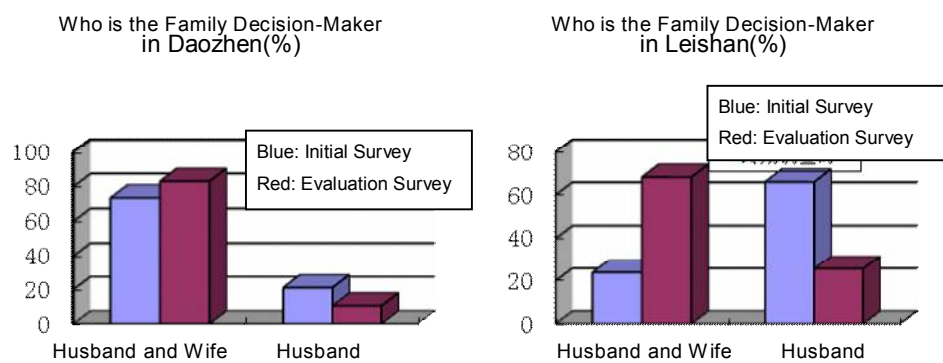
3-2-3 Contributions of LIP to promoting gender equality and regional development

The impact observed from the project sites was as follows: Villagers started to clean up community roads and rivers that were contaminated with rubbish, to establish self-management committees for village roads and water facilities, and to establish village mutual help funds (Homma 2009, JICA 2010b: 24-37).

According to an evaluation survey conducted of 1,062 households, women have become better able to make sole decisions and joint decisions with their male partners (an increase from 23.9% to 68.23% in Leishan County as seen in Table 1). In the project villages, there was less abuse of women and less discrimination against women who have not produced sons than in non-project villages (JICA 2008:50-57; also see Table 3-1). As for gender roles, the survey shows that most farmers (more than 80%) in the two counties believe that both husbands and wives should participate in activities outside of the family, which indicates that the traditional perceptions are diminishing (ibid.).

⁶ Income earned by such urban employment was the majority share of household income: 81% in Daozhen and 51.2% in Leishan (JICA 2006:3)

**Figure 1: Impact of the Guizhou project on gender equality:
Family Decision Making**



Source: JICA, 2008: 50.

**Table 3-1: Impact of the Guizhou project on gender equality:
Discrimination against women who have not produced sons**

Item	Yes	No	Have no idea	Total
Total	5.84	91.05	3.11	100.00
Daozhen	0.71	96.14	3.14	100.00
Leishan	15.75	81.22	3.04	100.00
Model villages in the two counties	5.18	93.44	1.38	100.00
Other villages in the two counties	6.63	88.20	5.18	100.00
Model villages in Daozhen	0.49	98.52	0.99	100.00
Other villages in Daozhen	1.02	92.86	6.12	100.00
Model villages in Leishan	16.18	81.50	2.31	100.00
Other villages in Leishan	15.34	80.95	3.70	100.00

Source: JICA, 2008: 51.

**Table 3-2: Impact on community participation:
Participation in collective activities (%)**

Item	Quite often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Have no idea	Total
Total	50.75	41.34	0.47	6.03	1.41	100.00
Daozhen	48.14	42.14	0.71	7.00	2.00	100.00
Leishan	55.80	39.78	0.00	4.14	0.28	100.00
Model villages in two counties	52.33	42.66	0.35	2.94	1.73	100.00
Other villages in two counties	48.86	39.75	0.62	9.73	1.04	100.00
Model villages in Daozhen	49.75	43.84	0.49	3.45	2.46	100.00
Other villages in Daozhen	45.92	39.80	1.02	11.90	1.36	100.00
Model villages in Leishan	58.38	39.88	0.00	1.73	0.00	100.00
Other villages in Leishan	53.44	39.68	0.00	6.35	0.53	100.00

Source: JICA, 2008: 56.

**Table 3-3: Impact on community participation: Democracy in the villages
(Do cadres discuss important issues with villagers before making decisions?) (%)**

Item	Quite often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Have no idea	Total
Total	61.39	27.31	7.91	1.51	1.88	100.00
Daozhen	57.43	31.00	8.29	1.14	2.14	100.00
Leishan	69.06	20.17	7.18	2.21	1.38	100.00
Model villages in two counties	63.73	29.02	4.49	0.86	1.90	100.00
Other villages in two counties	58.59	25.26	12.01	2.28	1.86	100.00
Model villages in Daozhen	58.13	34.24	4.68	0.99	1.97	100.00
Other villages in Daozhen	56.46	26.53	13.27	1.36	2.38	100.00
Model villages in Leishan	76.88	16.76	4.05	0.58	1.73	100.00
Other villages in Leishan	61.90	23.28	10.05	3.70	1.06	100.00

Source: JICA, 2008: 56.

On the issue of community participation and democratic decision making, project villages have higher rates of participation in community organizations and attendance at meetings, and residents also feel greater satisfaction in village democracy (as seen in Table 3-2 and Table 3-3). There was also a significant improvement in socio-economic status, such as household income (9% to 12% higher than in non-project villages), in residential conditions, and in living environment such as drinking water facilities and toilets (ibid).

The project is highly appreciated by the national leadership as shown by the fact that the national-level project counterpart has been proposing that LIP be adopted as a national program for rural development.

3-3. Case 2: PAPROSOC (Integrated Rural Development Project for Small Farmers) and PAPROSOC 2 in Chiapas, Mexico⁷

3-3-1. Context and Project Description

Mexico, with a population of 106 million and a GDP per capita amounting to US\$9,900 in 2008 is categorized as an upper middle income country (<http://data.worldbank.org/country/mexico>). However, the distribution of wealth is highly skewed. Its poverty headcount ratio at the national poverty line was 40.7% in 2004 (ibid.) and the Gini Index was 0.482 as of 2008 (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2172.html>). Poverty in rural areas, especially in the South and Southeastern regions where indigenous populations are concentrated, has always been a concern in national development policies and programs (JICA 2005: i). Chiapas, located in the South at the border with Guatemala, and populated by 4.2 million residents as of 2000, is the poorest area (Hanawa 2008:42-43) as shown by two national censuses (Indice de Marginalizacion and Indice de Riezgo Social, both taken in 2007) as well as the Human Development Index (2004) at state levels. Responding to a request from the Mexican government, in 1998-1999 JICA implemented development planning research in the Soconusco district of Chiapas to elaborate a master plan for rural development (JICA 1999). On the basis of the resulting master plan, two PAPROSOC projects were implemented between 2003 and 2009. As men often migrate to other regions in Mexico or abroad searching for job opportunities, women frequently play key roles at home in families and communities. Therefore, the two projects mainly targeted women (JICA 2005:1).

The goal of PAPROSOC was to support villagers and local governments in running participatory and self-reliant rural development programs and projects (<http://www.jica.go.jp/project/mexico/2455025E0/01/index.html>). The project sought to enhance self-reliance in view of the fact that one-third of the local household income came from public support (Suzuki 2008:52). The project was implemented in five pilot villages of four municipalities. It had four main objectives: 1) improve municipal

⁷ PAPROSOC and PAPROSOC 2 are “Proyecto de asistencia para los pequeños productores en la región del Soconusco, Estado de Chiapas” and “Proyecto sobre Asistencia para Desarrollo Rural Sustentable en la Región del Soconusco, en el Estado de Chiapas PAPROSOC-2” respectively.

capacities, 2) plan and implement mini projects in the villages, 3) facilitate inter-institutional coordination among stakeholders at village, municipal and state levels, and 4) elaborate guidelines for sustainable and self-reliant rural development. It should be noted here that the project did not include specific technical transfer components; instead it asked *beneficiaries* to become *active participants* to collaboratively create their own development process (<http://www.jica.go.jp/project/mexico/2455025E0/01/index.html>).

3-3-2. How was LIP introduced and applied: emphasis on internalization and institutionalization of self-reliance and step-by-step group problem-solving practices

Some LIP methods (such as maximum utilization of locally available resources and institutions, application of multi-layer approaches, facilitation of mutual trust, and creation of space for dialogue among stakeholders) were introduced during the first phase. The project team held seminars and utilized LIP materials to introduce the LIP concepts (Takasago 2007:172-173).

PAPROSOC 2 tried to scale up and institutionalize the results of PAPROSOC, focusing on the empowerment of village women. It aimed to establish a self-reliant and participatory rural development mechanism in all the municipalities in alignment with the rural development policies of the Chiapas counterpart agency and the central government (<http://www.jica.go.jp/project/mexico/0603190/01/index.html>).

The project objectives were: 1) to establish officially sanctioned rural development commissions (CDR) in city councils, 2) to develop the capacities of the committees in planning and implementing sustainable rural development, 3) to facilitate comprehension of project management methods based on LIP, especially for self-reliance and step-by-step group problem-solving practices, among stakeholders, including the committees and residents in pilot villages, and 4) to elaborate sustainable and autonomous rural development guidelines based on LIP (ibid). Thus, in PAPROSOC 2, LIP was applied from the project's design stage. The project emphasized that it is important that people "internalize" the project cycle (needs assessment through Participatory Rural Appraisal, planning, implementation and evaluation) so that the villagers can learn to be analytical and strategic enough to manage their own projects autonomously (<http://www.jica.go.jp/project/mexico/0603190/02/b01.html>).

3-3-3. Contributions of the projects to gender equality and regional development

PAPROSOC contributed to capacity development of the city council staff dealing with rural development. Positive impacts on female participants were confirmed through interviews with “beneficiaries,” municipal/state government staff, and project experts. The majority of the participants testified that they have come to be confident of themselves through the collective experience of running mini-projects, such as kitchen gardens, flower cultivation, and kitchen stove improvements. They felt that they have become more self-reliant and more active agents of rural development. This perception was confirmed by the municipal staffs (JICA 2005: ii-iv, Takasago 2007:173).

The purpose of PAPROSOC 2 was to establish a sustainable and self-reliant rural development system based on LIP and to mainstream it into the government’s regular programs. At the Soconusco District level, official Rural Development Committees were established and their members were trained to understand LIP. The committees then analyzed their own situations and planned and implemented mini-projects to improve life conditions, a process which was funded and monitored by local governments. This process was later documented in the form of a guideline manual (JICA 2009: 13, 17-18) which is now being translated into English to be used at other JICA project sites to mainstream LIP methods. In Mexico, the guideline has been proposed as a means to operationalize Sustainable Rural Development Laws (LDRS :Ley Desarrollo Rural Sostenible) (Interview with Mr. Hanawa 2010).

3-4. Case 3: REDCAM (Group Training on Participatory Development Network in Central America and the Caribbean Region)

3-4-1. Context and project description

The two month course of REDCAM held in Japan and Central American countries (mainly Costa Rica) is a LIP training program that was designed and implemented in the period 2005-2010 for practitioners in Central America and Caribbean countries⁸. Training materials were distributed in advance and the participants were asked to study the content, especially with reference to post-war Japan and its Life Improvement Movement (IC Net 2010:2). In Japan, participants learned through lectures and field studies the concepts and practices of LIP, including the qualification and skills necessary to livelihood extension workers (IC Net 2010:.3-4). Subsequently, in Costa Rica the participants visited LIP projects. Finally, they drew up LIP action plans and implemented them in their home countries. They are now national members of the

⁸ Although two courses were offered separately in 2005-2007 and 2008-2010, this paper calls both these courses REDCAM.

network of ex-participants and participate in annual reunions to exchange knowledge and experiences. So far, 99 practitioners from eight countries have participated in the course. The program will continue, with some upgrading, at least until 2013 (JICA Tsukuba 2011). Another course based on LIP has been offered to policy makers so that the LIP methods can be institutionalized and mainstreamed (ibid).

3-4-2. How was LIP introduced and applied: step-by-step, and with self-help problem-solving and its institutionalization

As mentioned above, between 2001 and 2003, research was conducted on the LIP and on its prospects for Japan's rural development cooperation (JICA 2002). On the basis of this research, JICA developed training and dialogue courses in Japan. One of the courses is REDCAM. It therefore contains many elements of LIP although it does not exclusively focus on home life issues.

3-4-3. Contributions to the promotion of gender equality and regional development

According to interviews with 26 former course participants, the concepts of LIP have been widely applied in their daily activities and they have been able to improve the life conditions of people, including themselves, without financial expenditure and with maximum utilization of locally available resources (Fujishiro 2007:171). In the field, 18 mini (pilot) projects which emphasize the empowerment and self-reliance of small farmers -- women in particular -- were implemented with little budget by course participants in collaboration with local organizations and educational institutions (JICA Tsukuba 2008:v). These projects cover, among other things, workshops for small farmers, the introduction of improved (economical) ovens/pottery, and improvement to the house environment (JICA Tsukuba 2010; Ota 2010). The former participants, through networking and knowledge sharing in each country and among countries, have developed materials in their own languages and have held joint workshops with practitioners, policy makers, and other governmental, non-governmental and educational institutes (JICA Tsukuba 2008, 2010).

The leading country for this program is Costa Rica. In Costa Rica, LIP methods have been utilized by the Ministry of Agriculture (MAG) to promote the Rural Development Program (PDR), a self-reliant and multi-sectoral program that is in alignment with the territorial approach agreed under the Central American Integration System (SICA) (JICA Tsukuba 2011). Most of the REDCAM participants came from MAG. After returning to their home countries, they developed training materials for extension workers based on LIP concepts and methods. Life improvement activities have been

voluntarily implemented by villagers. In some Costa Rican communities, particularly in the Upala and La Cruz municipalities in the northern region, people, especially women, have carried out projects such as repairing unpaved roads, improving kitchens, processing maize collectively, and making and selling handicrafts and paintings (Ota 2010). The former REDCAM participants expressed the view that they are now able to work in teams and coordinate more effectively with other organizations (JICA Tsukuba 2011). They also testified that village women now have greater ownership of their own lives and can exchange and express their opinions on public occasions (Ota 2010). LIP methods have been mainstreamed in MAG which plans to integrate them into its twenty-year national development strategy⁹ as well as into SICA's rural development policies (JICA Tsukuba 2011).

4. Conclusion

Japan's LIP and its application to JICA's projects have been attempts to foster rural people's, especially women's, problem-solving capacities to promote gender equality and regional development. The core method is the facilitation of female groups to gain agency through step-by-step "scientific" and self-help problem-solving practices in home life and community activities. Such methods have been institutionalized and have even been mainstreamed into national programs or policies.

Since such activities were designed to use as much locally available resources as possible, they allow participating women to rapidly internalize problem-solving capacity as a new norm in their lives. As agency is core capacity in people's lives, applicable to solving a variety of problems, the women's groups gradually enhanced their capacities to address issues related to strategic gender interests (SGIs), to participate in decision-making in their communities, and to influence budget management both at home and in the community.

LIP methods/elements have been applied partly or fully to JICA's development projects since 2006. In Guizhou Province in China, Chiapas in Mexico, and in Central America and Caribbean countries, LIP methods have been applied and have contributed to improving gender equality in families and communities. They have even helped villagers in general to become more self-reliant and work cooperatively for community improvement and rural development.

⁹ Política de Estado Costarricense Agroalimentaria y de Desarrollo Rural.

The experiences of LIP in Japan and in developing countries have proven to be effective beyond time and space in contributing to empowering women and fostering rural development to create societies with greater gender equality.

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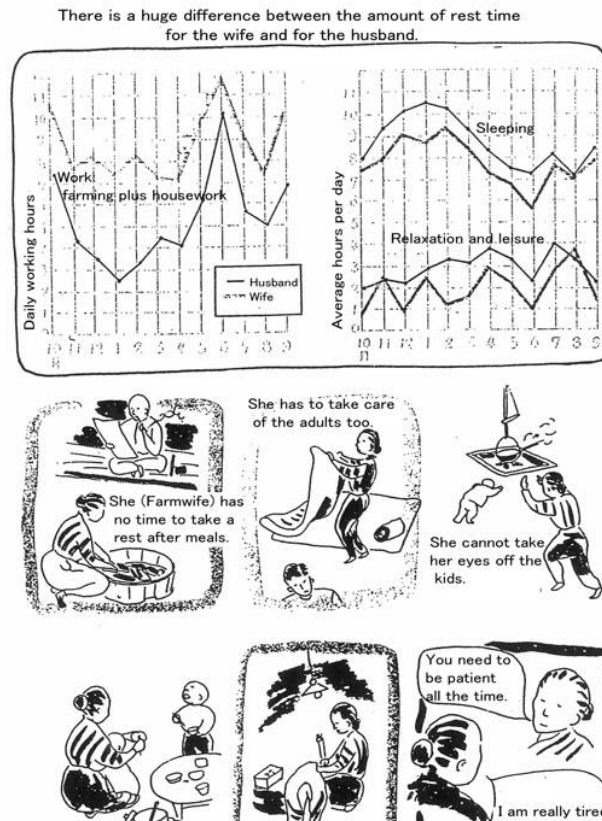
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Annex1 1: Rural women's (young wives') daily life

She is physically and mentally tired...



Source: JICA Tsukuba 2006:8-22, based on Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, ed. (1954) *Rural Livelihood Improvement*, p.43.